

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

March 25, 2004

SONOMA COUNTY COASTAL TRAIL, PHASE I

File No. 03-142

Project Manager: Richard Retecki

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$455,000 to the California Department of Parks and Recreation for trail planning, environmental analysis, and minor trail construction in coastal Sonoma County.

LOCATION: Coastal Sonoma County (Exhibits 1 & 2)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Coastal Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Sonoma County in the Region

Exhibit 2: Project Locations

Exhibit 3: Salt Point and Fort Ross Trails

Exhibit 4: Red Hill and Carrington Ranch Trails

Exhibit 5: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following Resolution pursuant to Sections 31400-31409 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed four hundred fifty-five thousand dollars (\$455,000) to the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) for trail planning, environmental analysis, and minor trail construction projects on public land for the California Coastal Trail in Sonoma County, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any funds, DPR shall submit for the review and approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, budget, and schedule and the names and qualifications of contractors and subcontractors to be employed.
 2. Prior to any trail construction, DPR shall submit evidence that all necessary permits and approvals have been obtained.
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3. In connection with trail construction, Conservancy and Proposition 12 funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign or signs, the design and placement of which has been reviewed and approved by the Executive Officer.
4. DPR shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development' into trail planning and trail construction, as appropriate."

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31400 *et seq.*
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.

PROJECT SUMMARY:

This authorization will enable the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) to plan, evaluate impacts to the environment, and conduct minor trail construction projects for the Coastal Trail on public lands in Sonoma County.

This is the first effort by the Conservancy and DPR to comprehensively plan for, and construct, coastal trail improvements for a single district. The project will serve as a template for other jurisdictions, agencies, and nonprofit organizations involved with the Conservancy in coastal trail implementation. The proposed authorization includes funding for both trail planning and construction. All of the work will take place in state and county park facilities

Planning: The planning efforts will include three work tasks: trail layout and design, environmental impact analysis, and permitting. To conduct the trail layout and design, DPR will identify new and revised trail alignments, prepare maps, and generate construction cost estimates. Environmental analyses will address all proposed improvements to insure compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The CEQA evaluations will include all necessary seasonal surveys of sensitive plant and animal species, wetland delineations and evaluations, cultural resource evaluations, and identification of all mitigation measure necessary for construction. Numerous permits will be needed before construction on the trail segments can take place. Under the proposed grant, DPR will also prepare documentation needed to acquire all permits for implementation of selected future projects.

Trail Construction: The four trail segments included in this authorization are located at Salt Point State Park, Fort Ross State Historic Park, Red Hill facility of Willow Creek State Park, and, the Carrington Ranch Trail.

Salt Point State Park: The existing trail will be extended through the Gerstle Cove area, (See Exhibit 3) connecting to the trails at the south end of the park. Trail construction will be done with hand tools and a small bridge will be constructed at the site to span a seasonal coastal

stream. Trail construction will consist solely of ground cover clearance, removal of small tree limbs, and signing. This segment is 1.5 miles long.

Fort Ross State Historic Park: trail work will connect Fort Ross Cove to the Reef Campground near the southern boundary to the park (Exhibit 3). Trail building crews will use hand tools to reconstruct the existing trail from the beach upslope to the Reef Campground at about the 120 foot elevation. Improvements for this 2,600 foot link will consist of drainage crossings, steps on steep bluff areas, trail rehabilitation and signing.

Red Hill Trail: a new 1.5-mile trail will be constructed over rolling terrain to the top of Red Hill a 1,100-foot peak with spectacular coastal views park (Exhibit 4). DPR will “scout” the terrain for the most feasible trail route and then mark the route for trail building crews. Hand tools, weed whackers and power mowers will be used to “cut” the rough trail through the coastal grassland to minimize environmental impact. This trail will be accessible from the Coastal Trail and provide a future inland connector to the Coleman Valley and Willow Creek areas. Signs will be placed along the Red Hill Trail and all connecting trails.

Carrington Ranch Trail: a new trail will be constructed across level ground for a distance of 2.5 miles park (Exhibit 4). As with the other three trails, all the construction for this trail will be done by DPR supervised crews using hand tools only. Besides the tract of the Coastal Trail, an existing loop trail will be rehabilitated, and two inland connectors will be constructed to the eastern property boundary. Appropriate signing will be developed and placed on the Coastal Trail and the inland connectors. This is a crucial segment that will provide connections to existing facilities and inland trail routes, as well as to the Coastal Trail on the north and south.

The Conservancy and DPR, along with regional and local entities, will continue to work together to prepare a second phase of trail construction projects, designed under the planning portion of this authorization, and forward them to the Conservancy for consideration later this year.

Site Description: The Sonoma county coastal margin is physically dynamic and is a major contributor to the local economy through the activities of agriculture, tourism, and recreation. The coast is rugged and there is a distinct geological break at the Russian River south to Marin County.

North of the Russian River the terrain consists of steep cliffs and bluffs, numerous steep parallel stream channels, open and forested coastal terraces and slopes, unique vegetative habitats, and small pocket beaches and sea stacks. The **Salt Point** trail meanders the open marine terrace upslope into the forested terrace. It will slowly gain elevation from approximately 80ft. at the bluff face to connect with the inland park trail at about 320 ft above sea level. The trail will connect with three day-use areas and two campgrounds, and with other trails on the bluff. The trail at **Fort Ross** will skirt the edge of the bluff that is open terrain with a couple of steep gullies that provide seasonal drainage. This trail will connect two of the major recreation areas of the park.

South of the Russian River the geology and landforms are very different. The coastal terrace is broad and slopes gently upward to hills that may reach above 1,200 feet, and that provide spectacular coastal views. The San Andreas fault zone passes through Bodega Bay and re-enters from the ocean at Fort Ross, where it crosses to the Gualala River valley and then in to Mendocino County. Numerous small settlements dot the landscape with the major coastal settlement being Bodega Bay, the only sheltered harbor for the county. Existing sections of the Coastal Trail, such as the Kortum Trail, are found along the bluff, on the terrace, or within dunes near Bodega Bay.

The **Red Hill Trail** will pass entirely through coastal grassland from Shell Beach gaining elevation gradually as it uses the existing trail. At approximately 500 feet elevation, a new trail alignment will take off to the southeast gaining elevation until it reaches the top of Red Hill at about 1,100 feet. This trail will not only connect with existing trails but also provide a connection for future inland trails. The **Carrington Ranch Trail** will traverse the coastal terrace along level terrain. The seaward portion of the property is a terrace with no major streams or creeks. Construction will take place on this terrace that is coastal grassland and seasonal wild flowers. This trail will be a segment of the Coastal Trail and will connect with two inland trail systems.

Project History: As part of the national Millennium Trail Program, the California Coastal Trail was designated a “Millennium Trail” by the Governor of California in the year 2000. That designation brought renewed interest in the trail and began a statewide effort to complete implementation of the Coastal Trail. As part of the statewide effort, Senate Bill 908, which was passed and adopted in 2001, required the Conservancy to consult and coordinate with DPR and the Coastal Commission to complete the trail. The initial step for the Conservancy was to work with others to produce for the Legislature by January 31, 2003 a comprehensive plan for the development of the Coastal Trail. This authorization relates to the Coastal Trail Plan, the Sonoma State Beaches General Plan Update, the Conservancy’s planning and project determinations for the Sonoma coast, and to local planning efforts for the Coastal Trail.

The Conservancy’s Coastal Trail Plan designated priority trail implementation recommendations for each coastal county. Running parallel with that planning process, were the Conservancy’s plans and priorities for acquisitions, enhancement, and public access for the Sonoma coast. The implementation recommendations and the Conservancy’s priorities melded to produce this project proposal that would not only enhance existing trails and construct new segments, but also assist in the process of connecting segments within facilities and connecting one facility to another.

This authorization is the first that comprehensively evaluates the needs of a single jurisdiction for trail implementation, and attempts through planning, coordination and collaboration, and funding to implement major portions of the Coastal Trail.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$455,000
Department of Parks and Recreation	<u>110,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$565,000

The anticipated source of funding for the proposed grant is the Conservancy’s FY 2001/02 appropriation from the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Fund (Proposition 12) designated specifically for use in the “California Coastal Trail Program.” The proposed project will carry out that funding purpose.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is undertaken pursuant to Sections 31400 *et seq.* of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, which authorizes the Conservancy’s involvement in development of coastal access.

Public Resources Code §31400 states the Legislature's intent that the Conservancy have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the coast. Under the proposed project, the Conservancy's funds would allow DPR to prepare plans for Coastal Trail improvements and to prepare environmental analysis to determine the extent of impacts that new trail construction and rehabilitation would have on the natural environment. Planning efforts will provide a framework for the timely implementation of trail segment construction through cooperation of other agencies and other participants in this project. Also, consistent with this Section, funds will be used by DPR for the construction or improvement of several trail segments.

Pursuant to §31400.1, the Conservancy may provide grants to public agencies to develop lands for public access purposes to and along the coast. All of the accessways to be planned, designed and constructed under the proposed project will provide public access to and along the Sonoma coast.

The proposed authorization is also consistent with §31400.2 which permits the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of the initial development of public accessways by a public agency. In determining the amount of funding, the Conservancy has considered the factors required by §31400.2, as described in more detail under the "Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines" section below.

As required by §31401, the proposed access facilities to be developed under this project, will be consistent with the Conservancy's "Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development." To ensure that the design of the accessway facilities conform to these standards, as a condition of this grant, DPR will be required to incorporate the Conservancy guidelines into the design planning process, as appropriate

The proposed project will carry out the mandate of §31408, which directs the Conservancy, to coordinate the development of the California Coastal Trail in consultation with the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Coastal Commission. The Conservancy has worked closely with DPR to establish priority trail segments that will result in a more continuous trail route, along with improvements that will provide safer public use.

Finally, §31409 allows the Conservancy to award grants and provide assistance to public agencies to establish and expand inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. The Red Hill Trail will provide an inland link to the Coleman Valley Road area, where it will be possible to connect through various easements to the DPR Ranger Station at Salmon Creek.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) AND OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 1 Coastal Trail Development, Objective's A B and C** the project will design, rehabilitate or construct new coastal trail segments, and provide appropriate facilities and signs for the improved trail segments.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001 in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the Public:** The proposed project has a broad level of support from public agencies and officials, nonprofit organizations, coastal trail advocacy groups, and the general public. Project supporters include: Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey, State Senator Wes Chesbro, Assemblymember Patti Berg, DPR, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, Sonoma County Regional Parks, Coastwalk, LandPaths, Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods. Letters of Support are attached as Exhibit 5.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located entirely within the coastal zone of Sonoma County.
5. **Need:** The proposed Coastal Trail project is a vital next step in the completion of the Coastal Trail for Sonoma County. The Conservancy is a crucial partner in the implementation of the trail not only for Sonoma County, but for the entire coast. Conservancy funding and collaboration are essential to move this project to completion.
6. **Greater-Than-Local Interest:** The California coast is renowned internationally as a tourist and recreation destination. The Sonoma coast and its existing recreational facilities will be further enhanced and more attractive as a result of the completion of the Coastal Trail. New trail access will be constructed and trail segments in need of repair will be rehabilitated to provide safe public access to and along the coast.

Additional Criteria

7. **Readiness:** If this authorization is approved, DPR is ready to begin work on the Coastal Trail in the spring of 2004.
8. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The project will enhance and implement the objectives of the Sonoma County Parcel Study (1999); the Russian River/North Coast Parcel Analysis (2002); the Coleman Valley Trails Study (2002); the Bodega Bay Trails Plan (2002); and, Completing the California Coastal Trail (2003). All five are previous Conservancy projects that have assisted and guided land protection and public access implementation for the Sonoma coast.
15. **Cooperation:** This proposed project evolved from discussions and conversations between the members of the West County/Coastal Working Group, a thorough planning and implementation analysis by State Parks, and the Conservancy's responsibility for Coastal Trail development.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The project is consistent with the Sonoma County Local Coastal Program, certified in 1981 and revised on August 3, 1999, in the following respects:

V. PUBLIC RECREATION

Sonoma Coastal Trail

Coastal trails being planned and developed by public agencies will be coordinated and linked into a State coastal trails system as part of the California Recreational Trails Plan prepared by the Department of Parks and Recreation, which will coordinate the overall trails system with local and regional agencies and organizations.

The Conservancy and DPR are coordinating this effort to complete the Coastal Trail on public lands within the Sonoma coastal zone. DPR has developed a trail rehabilitation and construction plan for numerous state and local park facilities in Sonoma County. This comprehensive county coastal trail plan will simplify the project determination process and successfully implement nearly 17 miles of coastal trail.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

To the extent that the project will involve repair, maintenance, and minor alteration or rehabilitation and reconstruction of existing trails, the proposed authorization is categorically exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15301, which provides for the repair, maintenance, and minor alteration of pedestrian trails where negligible or no expansion of use will occur beyond that which exists, and under §15302, which exempts reconstruction or replacement of existing trail facilities.

The proposed trail improvements and construction are categorically exempt from review of environmental impacts under CEQA pursuant to §15303 as limited, new construction of small facilities. Section 15304 likewise exempts the new construction and trail improvements, because these activities will only produce minor alterations to land, water and or vegetation in the form of vegetation removal or pruning with hand tools, erosion control, vegetation plantings, stairway construction, invasive species removal, and signing,.

The planning, design, and environmental analysis portions of the proposed authorization are categorically exempt from the provisions of CEQA under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations §15306, which provides exemptions for data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. It is also exempt under §15262, which provides an exemption for feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions not yet approved.

Upon approval of the project, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.